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COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Sixth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 152nd MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Tuesday, 19 April 1994, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Mrs. BADRAN

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The meeting was called to order at 3.35 p.m.

STATEMENT BY THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

1. The CHAIRPERSON welcomed the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. On behalf of the latter, she congratulated him on his appointment, and invited him to address the Committee.

2. Mr. AYALA LASSO (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) said that it was a great pleasure for him to address the Committee for the first time, only a few days after taking up his duties in Geneva as the first United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

3. As he had indicated in a recent statement to the fiftieth session of the Commission on Human Rights at its fiftieth session, he would require the support and collaboration of all States, human rights bodies, intergovernmental agencies and non-governmental organizations, including the expertise of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, in meeting the challenges of his mandate as defined by General Assembly resolution 48/141. He felt that special emphasis should be put on the importance of compliance by all States with the obligations they had undertaken in ratifying or acceding to international human rights instruments, and he intended to establish harmonious and fruitful working relations with all human rights treaty bodies.

4. Within that general framework, he wished to stress the specific interest and value he attached to the Committee's work. In that respect, it was a source of satisfaction and pride for him that his country, Ecuador, had been the second in the world, and the first in Latin America, to ratify the Convention; Ecuador had also had the privilege of hosting the Committee's first informal regional meeting in 1992.

5. The World Conference on Human Rights had stated, in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, that international cooperation and solidarity should be promoted to support the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and that those rights should be a priority in the United Nations system-wide action on human rights. The role of the Committee, as the treaty body entrusted with facilitating and monitoring the effective implementation of the Convention, was therefore clearly an essential and difficult task. The Convention had set standards which addressed civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights as elements of an interdependent and mutually reinforcing entity. Undeniably, the contrast was stark between those norms and the actual conditions which too many children still faced in the world today. At the same time, the unprecedented and extremely rapid rate of ratifications and accessions to the Convention, the leading human rights instrument, to which there were currently 157 States parties, was a heartening sign of the widespread commitment and political will to promote and protect the rights of the child, and brought close the goal, urged by the World Conference on Human Rights, of universal ratification by 1995.

6. That special commitment of the international community called for international efforts and required joint and coordinated action from the entire United Nations system as well as from a variety of organizations and competent bodies that were working, both at the governmental and non-governmental levels, to improve the lot of children and ensure the effective realization of their rights.

7. The Committee on the Rights of the Child, as the main focal point of those international efforts, had already accomplished constructive and useful results during its first five sessions, and its achievements had been noted with much appreciation by various instances, including the Commission on Human Rights and the General Assembly.

8. The current special session, convened as a measure essential to cope with the Committee's heavy workload and to prevent the build-up of an undesirable backlog in the consideration of reports of States parties, clearly illustrated the need for adequate solutions to meet the high expectations created by the Convention and its implementation system.

9. He would like to stress the importance he attached, in the exercise of his mandate, to the essential and growing role the rights of the child had come to play in the overall human rights programme, in the spirit of the World Conference on Human Rights which, as the Committee was aware, had underlined the importance of efforts to promote the rights of the child to survival, protection, development and participation. In that context, he would endeavour, with the Committee's support and collaboration and through ongoing cooperation with all relevant organs and mechanisms of the United Nations as well as other competent bodies active in the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to address the main issues identified by the World Conference. That would include efforts to attain universal ratification by 1995; problems of children in especially difficult circumstances; protection of the human rights of the girl child; and protection of children in armed conflicts, on which subject a major study was being undertaken by the Secretary-General upon the Committee's recommendation. He also wished to assure the Committee that he would do his utmost, in the exercise of his new functions, to support the Committee and facilitate its work in order to enable it to meet its mandate expeditiously and effectively.

10. The CHAIRPERSON thanked the High Commissioner for Human Rights for his statement. She expressed appreciation of his acknowledgment of the Committee's special role and his awareness of the need to seek all possible solutions to the difficulties it faced in carrying out its tasks.

11. Mr. HAMMARBERG associated himself with the welcome extended to the High Commissioner for Human Rights, whom the Committee viewed as one of the main advocates of the cause it served. Although the goal of universal ratification of the Covenant by 1995 seemed within reach, the High Commissioner's support would be invaluable in the continued efforts to that end and in the subsequent task of encouraging States parties to discharge the obligations they had assumed by submitting regular periodic reports, in accordance with the Committee's guidelines. Among the measures advocated at the World Conference on Human Rights were the exploration of ways to link the Committee's

monitoring tasks more closely with the provision of advisory services by the Centre for Human Rights, and enhanced relations between the United Nations treaty bodies, including the Committee, and other bodies of the United Nations family. In that connection, the Committee's memorandum of agreement with UNICEF was a crucial document.

12. He took the opportunity to stress the need for adequate resources to enable the Committee to perform its functions effectively, and drew the High Commissioner's attention to article 43, paragraph 11, of the Convention in that regard. The staff of the Centre for Human Rights worked very hard to support the Committee, but their efforts were hampered by a lack of adequate resources. Likewise, much of the impact, especially at the national level, of the Committee's findings could be lost because of delays in translating its proceedings, including the summary records. In that connection, he urged renewed attention to the Committee's request that the proceedings of each session, including State parties' reports, the Committee's list of issues for further consideration, the written and oral responses from the respective Governments, the Committee's concluding observations and the summary records, should appear in a single comprehensive document, which would provide a basis for subsequent deliberations as well as a model for reporting by other States parties.

13. Mr. AYALA LASSO (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) thanked Mr. Hammarberg for his observations. As a former President of his country had said, only one person should be regarded as privileged and that was the child. He would adopt the same stance in his task of overseeing all United Nations activities in the field of human rights. The Committee's responsibilities related to the most important part of mankind. For that reason, he shared the desire to achieve speedy universal ratification of the Convention, a goal which he unfailingly advocated in all the forums he attended. He saw as one of his main tasks the enhancement of coordination among members of the United Nations family, the importance of which he had stressed at a recent coordination meeting. Not least among the benefits to be gained thereby was a more rational use of increasingly limited resources. He therefore welcomed measures such as the memorandum of agreement between the Committee and UNICEF. In the short time since assuming his office, he had already been confronted by the administrative and other factors which had such a bearing on work throughout the system. He was confident that the Secretariat had taken full account of the Committee's request for the publication of its proceedings in a single document. Of course, the need to strive for zero growth in expenditure, and for associated measures, including the avoidance of duplication and waste, had to be borne in mind. He was aware, nevertheless, of the importance of efforts to maintain the spirit and momentum of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action; he appreciated, in that regard, that considerations which might be regarded as of secondary importance were often the source of most difficulties in practice. He would do his best, therefore, to give attention to the concerns voiced by the Committee. He intended to cooperate to the utmost with all United Nations human rights treaty bodies, but he assured the Committee of his special regard for its role.

14. Mr. BASTA (United Nations Children's Fund), also speaking on behalf of the Executive Director of UNICEF, said that he had great pleasure in welcoming the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to Geneva.

15. UNICEF had the utmost respect for the work and integrity of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and sincerely hoped that it would be afforded all the assistance it might require. It also hoped that the rights of the child would be given due prominence in the United Nations fiftieth anniversary celebrations as well as in the various social conferences due to be held in the near future which because of their very nature encompassed children's affairs such as the Fourth World Conference on Women, the World Summit for Social Development and the International Conference on Population and Development.

16. Finally, in view of the massacre of women and children in Rwanda and other parts of the world, some strengthened mechanism was needed to enable the perpetrators to be brought to justice and made accountable for their crimes.

17. Mr. AYALA LASSO (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) said that he felt privileged to be in a position to work with the Executive Director of UNICEF, whose efforts on behalf of children he so much admired.

18. The most recent meeting of the Committee on Coordination, which had discussed the fiftieth anniversary celebrations, had unanimously agreed that every endeavour of the United Nations family had a single purpose, namely, to give human beings the opportunity to live decently and with dignity. The situation of children was therefore in the forefront of the concerns of the various United Nations bodies and would be addressed at the anniversary celebrations, but more particularly at the three social conferences mentioned by the representative of UNICEF. His office would do its utmost to emphasize the importance of the problems and rights of the child and the need to tackle those problems in the most effective way.

19. Mgr. BAMBAREN GASTELUMENDI, associating himself with the welcome and congratulations extended to the High Commissioner, said that it was particularly gratifying that a fellow Latin American and neighbour had been appointed to such an important post.

20. As it worked its way through the reports of States parties, the Committee saw the extent to which the situation of children varied according to the level of prosperity of their country, and never failed to be struck by the very serious problems affecting children in the Latin American and Asian countries. Many problems, such as child labour, the killing of children in the streets and the sale of children for various purposes transcended national boundaries. It was therefore important to encourage ratification of The Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Inter-country Adoption as a means of tackling those tragic problems which affected half of mankind. The Committee was confident that the High Commissioner's influence would help to promote action to counter those adverse trends.

21. Mr. AYALA LASSO (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights), acknowledging with respect and admiration Mgr. Bambaren Gastelumendi's outstanding work on behalf of children throughout Latin America, said that it would inspire him to tackle the many and widespread human rights problems confronting him in his new post.

22. The CHAIRPERSON thanked the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for addressing the Committee and for responding to the points raised, and said that the Committee counted on his support in the execution of its tasks.

The meeting rose at 4.10 p.m.